

BELVIDERE WILL SHRINK AGAIN IF SANTEE CROSSES BERKELEY

Negro 'Street' Remains at Orangeburg County Plantation,
Where Fortune Was Made in Cotton at 75 Cents a Pound

By F. M. Kirk

Eutawville, Oct. 12 - Special: There was a time when Belvidere Plantation, for more than a century a seat of the Sinkler family, was bounded north and south by two crystal streams. The waters of Santee, rushing by on the north, were then as clear as the icy waters that flow lazily from Eutaw Springs on the south.

But as the white man developed, in his devastating way, the lands he had taken from the red man, Great Santee, as though to avenge the wrong done to the Indians, changed from crystal clearness to a reddish hue, an everlasting memorial to an unhappy race.

Soon, if plans for the Santee-Cooper development materialize, red water will meet clear water the rusty mixture will cover much of the fertile lands where James Sinkler made a fortune in cotton culture during the last years of the eighteenth century.

The years have made little change at Belvidere. The house, built about 1795, is probably in as good condition as it was a hundred years ago. Situated on the crest of a gently rising hill, it faces east and commands a beautiful view of a great expanse of green lawn, dotted with trees.

Negro 'Street' Persists

The negro 'street' is just as it was in ante-bellum days. Each little house is neatly white-washed, and each has its little garden. The chapel, built for slaves, still stands. Descendants of those slaves have their prayer meeting in the same house of worship as did their forefathers.

And the garden at Belvidere is still a riot of glorious color in spring. Only one sad change is to be found at the old place. When General Charles St. George Sinkler died in the summer of 1934, the last of the Belvidere men passed away. Belvidere is different, without General Sinkler.

The plantation is a mile northwest of the battlefield of Eutaw Springs which is a part of it. The old Nelson's Ferry Road runs close to the house.

Captain James Sinkler, who secured the grant to Belvidere in 1770, according to available records, was a son of the Scot emigrant, and lived at his plantation, Old Santee, in St. Stephen's Parish. When Santee River began its series of disastrous freshets in the latter quarter of the eighteenth

century, Captain Sinkler, with his brother, Peter, of Lifeland, made early experiments in a series of dikes to protect crops from the river water.

For some time these embankments proved successful, but as the freshets rose higher and higher valuable swamp lands had to be abandoned and new lands had to be secured for cultivation. It was probable for this reason that Captain Sinkler secured his Belvidere tract in St. John's Parish.

Cotton at Seventy-five Cents

Together with Captain Peter Gilliard, of St. Stephen's Parish (later of the Rocks), Captain Sinkler began experiments in cotton in St. John's. So successful were these experiments in the new staple crop that both men forsook their St. Stephen's plantations and moved up to their St. John's lands. By 1800 both had made fortunes in cotton cultivation. In 1799, Captain Sinkler harvested an average of two hundred and sixteen pounds an acre on three hundred acres of cotton, for most of which he received seventy-five cents a pound.

During those early days of cotton it was Belvidere Plantation which set the example in the handling of the crop. Until as late as 1801 packing the cotton in bags was a slow tedious process. The compressing of cotton into bales was a much later development. Captain Sinkler's overseer at Belvidere developed an advanced method of packing which soon spread to other sections.

The first Sinkler of Eutaw, which is "across the crick" as the negroes still say, was a son of James of Belvidere. The love of horses which ran in the blood of the Eutaw Sinklers, ran also in the veins of the Sinklers of Belvidere. The plantation's stables of blooded stock was famous.

There was an interesting ritual in the care of the thoroughbreds in antebellum days. Each morning the head groom, in immaculate white gloves, handed an equally immaculate pair to each individual groom. Each horse had a groom.

Belongs to Sinkler Heirs

Each groom, after donning his gloves, was ordered to run his hands over the coat of the horse for which he was responsible. Each then showed his gloves to the head groom. If any dust or dirt showed on his white gloves, the groom was thoroughly flogged by the head groom under the supervision of the overseer. The system is said to have been highly efficient.

Belvidere is now the property of the heirs of the late General Charles St. G. Sinkler, who are Mrs. W. Kershaw Fishborne, of Pinopolis; Mrs. Nicholas Roosevelt, of Philadelphia and Gippy Plantation, Berkeley County, and Mrs. Dunbar Lockwood, of Boston. The plantation is still planted extensively and the house is still the scene of week-end parties.

The Nelson's Ferry Road, bordering the ward on the north, was once the chief road to the upcountry. Leading from the Congaree Road (now Highway 46) near Belmont Plantation, the road crossed Santee River at Nelson's Ferry immediately behind Belvidere. Beneath the oaks that border it on either side rolled the stage coaches in colonial days. And through Belvidere's broad acres lumbered the carriages and wagons taking plantation folk to the mountains during the summer, or the High Hills of Santee, another favorite summer resort.

From the piazza, could be seen the troops leaving for the battlefield during the War Between the States. And down the same road marched the Yankee raiders to spread ruin and desolation in St. John's.

Charleston Guns Heard

In her "Memories of a South Carolina Plantation During the War", Mrs. Elizabeth Allen Coaxe, daughter of Charles Sinkler, of Belvidere, tells that at Belvidere, sixty miles from Charlestown, the sound of the cannonading during the bombardment of Fort Sumter was heard. A few years later, they could see the dull glow in the sky that told of the tragic burning of Columbia.

During the war federal gunboats came up the Santee several times and passed within a mile of Belvidere. On one occasion, a gunboat was sent up the river with a message to Charles Sinkler from Admiral Dahlgren, an old friend. The message was delivered by Lieutenant O'Kane. Mr. Sinkler's reaction to the message from his old friend reminds one of General Robert E. Lee's loyalty to Virginia.

"I am surprised," he said stiffly to Lieutenant O'Kane, "to see that Dahlgren writes he supposes I am loyal to the United States. He knows very well that my loyalty belongs to my state and only through the state to the government."

"Certainly, sir," answered the embarrassed Yankee. Before leaving for his gunboat, he signed a protection from Admiral Dahlgren, which amounted to nothing, as later events were to prove. Before sailing, however, the officer sent to Belvidere some tins of coffee and biscuits, and crystallized sugar. Mr. Sinkler reciprocated with a lamb, fresh butter and vegetables.

The officer was scrupulously polite; quite different from those who were later to visit Belvidere. He wrote saying his men had killed some hogs in the swamp, thinking they were wild, but that on hearing they were Mr. Sinkler's, he wished to pay for them. The money was refused.

The negroes at the plantation behaved well during the whole course of the war. And they remained faithful to their master. A humorous story is related of Mingo, who had been sent on a long trip for Mr. Sinkler. On his return he was asked for news. His answer was: "Well, Missus, I hear that Charleston has evaporate and that the country is persued with Revels and skites."

Finally came the dreaded raiders under the command of General Hartwell. Over the lawn swarmed negro soldiers, whooping and yelling. Smokehouses were broken open and provisions destroyed. Many came into the house, cracking long whips over the heads of the defenseless women, shouting "Damned rebels", and destroying everything within sight.

A message was sent to General Hartwell's headquarters at Eutaw, begging for protection. Captain Torrey was sent with a guard, and the house was afterwards protected. Only a few of the slaves left with the raiders, and many of those who left later returned.

When Lincoln's emancipation proclamation was published, Mr. Sinkler summoned the plantation and announced the news to them, and said that he intended to divide his provisions with them. This was done.

"Daddy Bull's" remark after Hartwell's raid was characteristic of most:
"Well, I never expected us to hear freedom come and knock at my door and I refuse it, but that is what me and my family have done for the sake of you all."

The Nelson's Ferry Road is almost abandoned now; freedom has come to a plantation of slaves; King Cotton seems about to be dethroned; but the lawn of Belvidere is as green as ever. Little is changed.